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ABSTRACT

Education is far more than the transmission of information. The importance of teachers as both authority figures and role models has often been overlooked in the educational and professional development of graduate students, as has been the importance of peer relationships. A study of 27 candidates for the Master's in Business Administration degree at a small university in California entailed interviews of three groups: (1) main campus students; (2) off-site students; and (3) online students. Findings revealed that: (1) main campus students expected and sought out interaction with teachers as part of their learning experience, whereas the electronic classroom students considered teachers more as an inanimate source of information; and (2) main campus students had the opportunity to develop peer relationships but did not, and were similar to off campus and electronic students in their view of classmates as providers of a competitive environment. It is concluded that computer-mediated education will succeed to the degree that educators understand the importance of peer and teacher relationships, how to help students develop them, and the role of competition in gaining or avoiding these relationships. (DB)

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The Importance of Authority and Peer Relations on the Educational Process of Onsite and Online Students: An Exploratory Investigation

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THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHORITY AND PEER RELATIONS ON THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS OF ONSITE AND ONLINE STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Dr. Kate Regan, Shendl Tuchman

We undertook this study to 1) examine the importance of peer and faculty relations in the educational process of onsite and online students; and 2) to generate hypotheses regarding the impact of these relationships on online education.

Typically, the evaluation of electronically delivered educational programs has focused on whether or not the online student has acquired the same knowledge of the subject matter as the onsite student.

Several studies have indicated that the student who receives hi/her education via telecommunications does in fact acquire the same degree of information as the student who sits in the classroom. However, if knowledge of the subject matter is the sole reason for participation in the educational system, and in graduate education in particular, there is little doubt that most of us would have fled the classroom long ago. The current educational system does not have the most effective design for the transmission of information if information is all one is trying to impart. It is important to recall that the current U.S. educational system was not really designed to transmit information, but rather to socialize children for participation in an industrial society.

Today, educators and business people are once again saying that the educational system is inadequate for equipping people to meet the challenges of a highly technical and pluralistic work place.

The different forms of electronic education that are being developed are being held up by some as the answer to a failing educational system. But to truly evaluate electronic education today, we must recall the original purpose of the educational system and ask: Is socialization still important? Do graduate schools have a responsibility to help socialize students into the norms of a particular profession? What variables are important to us in the socialization process? and Can this process take place when students learn via computer and modem? Socialization is influenced by a variety of factors, including the students' relationships to the institution, the department, the instructor, peers, and the political/social environments.

The program we investigated began in 1986 when a small university in California entered into a joint-venture agreement with a telecommunications company. Dr. Regan was the Director of the Online Management program and I was the Manager of Instructional Services with the telecommunications vendor. The purpose of the partnership was to deliver courses leading to a Master's degree in Business Administration to students across the country who would not otherwise have access to a university campus. It was assumed that the values espoused by the graduate school of business would also be transmitted to the distant-learners. Theses values included an emphasis on "people skills" and organizational competence. The challenge was to convey these values to management students who had no face-to-face contact wit either the instructor or the other students. The question was, would students be able to acquire socialization skills that would help them achieve their goals in the business world?

The student population we chose, represented three different groups: two

groups were onsite students, one group attending class at the main campus and the other was part of a satellite program some 50 miles from the main campus: the third group was the online students.

The curriculum and course requirements were the same in each of the programs, and in some cases the same faculty members taught in all three programs. Although the curriculum content was consistent, there were design differences. One difference was the time required to complete a course. The other was the likelihood of studying with a consistent peer group/ The students in the online program generally completed one course in one year without any peer group interaction. Students onsite, at the main campus, completed anywhere from 1-6 courses per year and id not attend class with a consistent peer group. The students at the satellite site completed between 6-8 courses in a year and remained with the same group of students.

A total of 30 students were contacted. Four students refused to participate in the study. Thirteen from both the onsite and online programs were interviewed in 20-30 minute telephone conversations. The interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the student.

Because the question we were studying was such a broad one, we decided to take an exploratory approach to the study. We relied on archival data and an open-ended ethnographic interviewing process. We asked questions that would help us understand why one group of students would choose to study through computer and modem and others would choose to attend class onsite. What were the past experiences of the educational system like for students? Did these experiences effect the decision to attend a traditional classroom or complete their education via computer and modem?

FINDINGS

We have separated the data into three main areas: 1) program selection and entry; 2) peer relationships; 3) authority relationships.

Regarding program selection and entry, we found that students who chose the online program tended to enter with higher grades on their transcripts, higher GRE scores and higher ranking professional positions.

Most of the students both on- and offline·were returning to school after 15-20 years and perceived their previous experiences on a broad continuum: from negative to very positive. However, onsite students tended to have easier access to both positive and negative past educational experiences, while online students had a more difficult time remembering these experiences. When asked, "what was your past educational experience like", students often misunderstood the question. Over 50% responded with the name of the degree they had earned. When asked about past experiences, one online student went so fat as to say "you know, school is school".

As regards relationships with educational authority, online students frequently reported that they expected little or nothing rom their instructors. When pressed for any fantasies regarding their instructors, online students claimed to have none. This appears to indicate that instructors remained as inanimate as the computer, seen as a source of information rather than as a potential mentor.

However, once they had completed the online experience, students reported that they wished they had had more interaction with the instructors. In particular, they reported they would have liked to have asked instructors more questions, but claimed the technology limited their interactions. Data regarding the administration of the program, however, contradicted these claims. In fact, the technology did allow students to ask questions and the syllabus they received gave them instructions for doing so. There was a limit to the number of questions students could ask, but archival data indicated that no online student ever reached that limit. Our research also found that although online students were encouraged to contact instructors by phone, they remained reluctant to do so.

In general, it appeared that students who chose to go to school online, repressed or at least had a more difficult time expressing their need for positive recognition by authority figures at the onset of their studies. The implication of this finding is that students who select online training programs, enter with a complex and often psychologically inaccessible set of personal needs regarding their relationship with authority figures and peers, and that these needs later complicate instruction once the student is online.

Onsite students, on the other hand, were much clearer from the outset about their desire for interaction with authority figures and their expectations of instructors. In general, student expectations and actual relationships with authorities were viewed to be a valuable part of their learning experience and professional development. As one student put it, "It was so exciting when Dr. Smith let me call her Betty." This student also reported, that she was better able to interact with authority figures in her work setting without feeling intimidated after this positive interaction. When asked what their most memorable experience was, a number of students reported without hesitation, "...getting anA..." The excitement about the grade seemed to reflect the thrill of both mastering personal goals and having been recognized by someone in authority. This peak experience where a personal goal and its recognition by tan authority figure coincided, was reported only by onsite students.

Students online and at the satellite site reported greater frustration with faculty and administration than did the main campus students. Experiences ranging from humiliation to non-connection were reported and did have an effect on students' decision to discontinue the program. This seems to confirm the phenomenon called flaming, where students' anger and frustration increases with their increasing distance form campus.

Based on this information, we developed three hypotheses:

1) the potential of developing positive relationships with authority figures is an important variable in the decision to attend an onsite education program;

2) the development of positive relationships with authority figures during graduate school is important in being able to make the career moves the student has established for him/herself;

3) students who chose computer-based distance education tend to be ambivalent about engaging in relationships with authority figures. We believe this ambivalence exists for one of two reasons:

a) either they have had positive relationships with authority and no linger view school as a means of gaining mastery over this developmental issue or;

b) the past experience with educational authority figures was in fact quite negative and online students are hoping to avoid it.

Enabling students to establish a positive relationship with authority figures was clearly a value held by the university as indicated by their choice of a joint-venture partner whose software only offered a mentoring relationship between student and instructor. However, it appeared that online students' ambivalence towards authority made it difficult to take advantage of this opportunity and for the university to impart this value.

Regarding competition and its importance to peer relationships, we asked students about their fears, fantasies or other expectations about returning to school. Most respondents replied that they had none. When probed, students, even online students who had no peer contact, reported that they were anxious about being able to compete with younger students. One student commented that "age and treachery win over youth and enthusiasm every time". Both online and offsite students made it clear that the presence of and their comparison to other students was their primary means of judging their competence. Online students indicated that the absence of interaction with other students was very isolating and detrimental to the educational process. As one student put it "...it lacked the camaraderie of the classroom, the interaction of one-on-one...you miss the sensory facets of watching the student, of watching his gestures, his motions, his tone of voice...you get more thought processes going...something that student can say can bring up a question in you mind..." or "the main thing I missed was the interaction of a classroom full of students and a teacher...so that you can lay out an idea or thought or an outline and have somebody else attack it right there...or support it..." Without the interaction and feedback from peers, online students found if difficult to regard themselves as an authority with their newly found information. They reported feeling disappointed because they were unable to prove themselves in a competitive classroom environment. They felt on the edge rather than on the cutting edge.

Onsite students had the opportunity to develop strong peer relationships, but they did not. They felt that having students in the classroom who had a variety of backgrounds and work experiences was interesting and helped broaden their horizons, but on no occasion did they report forming close bonds with their classmates. Onsite students did what online students were unable to do - they measured their success in the program in competition with their peers.

As a result of these data we hypothesized that both online and onsite business students value peer relationships not because they represent potential alliances, but because they provide a competitive environment where success can be measured.

Clearly, one of the values of the business world is competition. The students we interviewed reported using their classmates to help them learn to compete. The choice by the university of a medium that did not allow peer interactions was inappropriate, we believe, for socialization into a business environment, since it did not provide opportunities to

master issues of either competition or collaboration.

IMPLICATIONS

In summary, we believe education is far more than the transmission of information. The importance of instructors as both authority figures and role models has often been overlooked in the educational and professional development of graduate students. The importance of peer relationships has not received the attention it deserves. Computer-mediated education will succeed to the degree that it understands the importance of peer and faculty relationships, how to help students develop them and the role of competition in gaining or avoiding these relationships. This investigation is only the first step in understanding the significance of these relationships to online education. Further study is required to help focus the questions, gather the data, and examine its implications for appropriate online curriculum development and program design.